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ABSTRACT

Decentralization of school systems is based on certain assumptions concerning the teaching profession. In the Swedish reform debate one assumption is put forth as a chief condition for successfully giving teachers more responsibility and power: there must be a common ground of professional norms, especially concerning internal and social values and the idea of knowledge, learning, and pupil development. In this paper the experiences of three teachers are analyzed in an effort to understand the content of teachers' professional ethics. The experiences discussed were taken from written statements collected from 200 comprehensive teachers as part of a pre-study focusing on teachers' own reports of ethical dilemmas as they have met them in their daily work. The three cases of ethical dilemmas in teacher practice are analyzed in terms of which social (and internal) values they affect. The social values addressed include: protection from injury, self-determination, privacy, and equality of opportunity. (IAH)

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# TEACHER PROFESSIONALIZATION: ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

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# Teacher professionalization: Ethical issues and dilemmas

## Introduction

Decentralization of a school system can be viewed primarily as structural changes concerning policy-making (Askling 1991). However, when structural changes are decided and effectuated as an overall reform, there are obviously great differences in implementation in different schools. These differences can be described and explained in term of organizational theories (Granström,1991). In the particular reform in Swedish schools to introduce teacher teams, the teacher-teams differ in the way they deal with the content of their common work. Some teams seem to have authentic cooperation while other teams more or less are pretending cooperation (Ahlstrand, 1991).
Some of the differences mentioned above can be explained in terms of local school context. However there are aspects of the teaching profession, which are affected by decentralization in all contexts, especially when teachers are given more power and autonomy than before. One of these aspect is professional ethics.

Decentralization of school systems is based on some assumptions concerning the teaching profession. Those assumptions are not always explicit. However in the Swedish debate one assumption is put forward as a chief condition for successfully giving teachers more responsibility and power - namely that there must be a common ground of professional norms. Such a base is considered especially important concerning subjects of values and the idea of knowledge, learning and pupils development.

In this paper some experiences from a recent study will be reported. Focus in the main study is put on two important aspects of a common ground, i. e. teachers professional ethical norms and their professional language. The purpose of the study is to research and describe teacher professionalization in terms of scientific base and common scientific language and also common ethical norms, which are considered important to the identity of any profession. Explicit as well as implicit professional ethics are parts of teachers´ common ground.

In order to understand the content of teachers´ professional ethics we have carried out a pre-study focusing on teachers own reports of ethical dilemmas as they have met them in their daily work.

## The present study

In this paper a few examples of reported critical ethical incidents are analysed and discussed. Teachers have given these reports in the last year in connection to courses and further education.

There is an agreement that teachers seeking to undertake further education and lessons make a written statement, before the education begins, in response to the following request:

*Describe a situation or a type of situations in which you think it´s difficult to decide what is right or wrong to do, in an ethical or moral aspect.*

200 teachers in comprehensive school have by this method given their spontaneus opinion of what is difficult in their professional practice from an ethical point of view.

In order to analyse and try to understand the nature of teachers´ ethical issues and dilemmas we have turned to moral philosophy and the theory of professional ethics.

## Social values and professional ethics

According to Bayles(1989) and others (e g Goldman, 1980, Gewirth, 1986) the norms of professional ethics are justified by the same social values as universal ethical norms. They are specifications of universal norms.

Social values relevant to professional ethics are

- **Protection from injury,** bodily or psychological. People should be protected from injury. Without protection from injury social life is not possible.

**-Self-determination.**People shoould be free from limits imposed by others to act as they desire to the extent that such freedom is compatible with other values.

- **Privacy.** People should have privacy, that is, control over the information others have about them. Privacy takes several forms - solitude, intimacy, and private or personal affairs. Privacy is an essential element of personal relationships.

- **Equality of opportunity.** People should have the same chances to reap the benefits of society. Discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion or ethnic origin, for example, deprives people of an equal opportunity.

Accordning to Bayles (1989) norms of professional ethics are derived from such social values. Professional activity should promote the well-being of clients. Different values and interests are involved depending on the context. Freedom and self-determination can be lost if professionals make decisions for one without one´s consent. Privacy is especially relevant to confidentiality of professional-client relations.

In order to catch the essence of teachers´ professional ethics it could be useful to analyse the kind of social values involved and in what way they interact with each other inside the professional practice.

However, teacher ethics are different from the professional ethics in other contexts. Moral dimensions of teaching also involve internal values determined by the main tasks of the school system. Socialization of children and education are based on other values than the universal social values above. Those internal values can either be in consensus with or be in opposition to universal social values. For example can the childraising function often be in contradiction to such values as self-determination and freedom.

When analysing teachers ethical difficulties it´s necessary to also take these internal values into consideration.

## Three cases

Three cases of ethical dilemmas in teacher practice will be analysed in terms of which social (and internal) values they affect. The cases represent different grades of complexity in the ethical question.

**Case number one.** This critical incident is described by a female teacher in the primary school. She writes:

*I have thought about how to behave and where my loyalty is supposed to be when my pupils are complaining about another teacher, by whom they are taught 1-2 times a week. Their complaints can be justified e.g. the teacher is late for the lesson, she is unfair, she is getting angry without any reason and she is threatening towards the pupils. As a colleague ,*

*should I side with the teacher or...? As a class teacher I am concerned about my pupils. I know they are right, but what can I do?*
*- Escape with the words "You have to talk to her about this".*
*- Agree with my pupils? That wouldn´t work, because then the situation becomes impossible to the other teacher.*
*- Go to the other teacher and tell her what my pupils think about her. How do we manage that?*
*There are of course other solutions, but the situation is difficult. Whatever I do, I feel it´s wrong.*

This teacher has a conflict between loyalty to her pupils and loyalty to her colleague. She seems to think that she ought to show her pupils that she is on their side and also that she believes in what they tell her. She wants to protect them from the injury that may be caused by the other teacher. At the same time she is afraid of hurting her colleague. She thinks she would hurt her if she tells what the pupils say about her. She would also do harm if she just let the pupils know that she agree without doing anything more, since she would thereby legitimate behaviour that could hurt her colleague.

The social value which is affected is protection from injury. The problem is that it is affected in two contradictory ways, since the protection from injury of the pupils demands a risk for injury of the colleague. The teacher describing this dilemma has obviously no guidance in her formulated normsystem that tells her which injury is worse or more serious to inflict as a professional. The colleague and the clients (pupils) have the same dignity. The dilemma then becomes impossible to solve. Probably she didn´t do anything at all.

The conflict of values is not in itself complicated, but it becomes difficult without any explicit professional code that says that the client well-being is the primary interest, even at the expense of the colleague, if it´s necessary.

| | |
|---|---|
| Protection from injury<br>for the clients | Protection from injury<br>for the colleagues |

**Case number two.**
This situation is described by a female teacher in the intermediate level of compulsary school.
She writes:

*What is important to me nowadays is the relation between immigrant children, Swedish children and Swedish parents.*

*In my class there is a boy who has a very negative attitude to immigrants and he is often in trouble with them. We have two immigrant boys in the class who he mostly ignore.*

*Since there have been several occasions when he has been bad to other immigrant children and also to grown-ups, I have phoned his parents. His mother can´t belief that he is so negative and she probably thinks I am exaggerating. It´s hard to know how far you should go, in order not to provoke the family. This boy is often involved when it involves something forbidden, not only in relation to immigrants. To handle him I have to have his parents on my side.*

*I have also met parents who think teachers are supporting the immigrant children, that we don´t correct them when they do something wrong and that we are helping them more than the Swedish children.*

This teacher seems to be unsure about her right to make the boy change his attitude to immigrants. She risks a conflict with the parents, which would make it difficult to get their support in other conflicts with the boy. At the same time she think that she has the responsibility to protect the immigrant children from injury. She is supporting them and that is criticized by other parents.

Which social values are affected?
- Immigrant children have the right not to be **injured**.
- The boy and his parents are **free** to have their personal opinions.
- The family has a right to **privacy.**
- The teacher has a **socialization function** and is obliged to give the children a norm of non-racial prejudice.She is supposed to help them accept the social value of equal opportunity.

The social values affected by this situation are contradictory but just in two directions. Obviously the teacher thinks it´s difficult to decide which values have priority over others.

protection from injury freedom of opinion

socialization privacy

**Case number three.**

This dilemma is described by a male teacher in the higher level of compulsary school. He writes:

*One example of such problems can be those situations when pupils tell you something in confidence. It could be about personal problems in the family involving the pupil or his or her parents.*

*For example: A teenage girl tells you that she is pregnant and wants an abortion. Her parents are absolutely not allowed to be informed.*

*What do I do? Shouldn´t the parents know this, so they can give some support to the girl? Or will they, if they are informed, make it more difficult for the girl instead?*

*Should the girl be left to manage alone?*

*The questions in such a situation are several. What do I do?*

The teacher describes very clearly the difficulties in the situation.
The social values affected are at least four.
The girl has a right to **privacy** in the meaning of having control over the information her parents have about her. She also has the right to **decide** what she will do in this situation. But if the teacher follows norms based on these values he also is taking a risk that she will be suffering from the difficulties of an abortion. He wants to **protect her from injury,** especially the psychological injury caused by bearing such a decision alone. The problem is complicated by the fact that the girl is a teenager and that her parents still are responsible for her well-being. The possibility for them to be responsible is limited by the confidence the girl give them. This fourth value - a **parental care and responsibility** - is also relevant in this case.

The teacher has no idea of what to do in this case. He has no idea of what would happen if one value is given priority as the most essential one. They cross each other like streets at a corner. And there are no traffic-lights!

| | |
|---|---|
| self-determination | parental responsibility |
| protection from injury | privacy |

What would a driver do if he was coming up to an intersection like this? Drive slowly trying to look in all directions at the same time? What about all the dangers he doesn´t see?
This teacher just stops, uncapable of doing anything, and after awhile that probably makes him feel very uncomfortable.
Is it possible to manage conflicts like this without any guidance at all? Certainly not, and it seems rare that teachers discuss such ethical dilemmas.

**Discussion.**

The significance of analyzing teachers descriptions of ethical dilemmas is to understand the content of the difficulties, which are formulated in terms of affected values, both social and internal. The analysis also makes it possible to see tendencies of what kind of ethical norms teachers identify and pay attention to.

The signs are rare (if any) in these three cases to indicate the existence of an explicit and conscious professional ethical norm system. These teachers are left alone to decide what is right or wrong and they are very convincing in describing how difficult this decision is. However, the situations described are not exclusive or rare. Probably an ordinary teacher faces such dilemmas every day, or at least weekly.

The most serious lack of explicit professional ethics is perhaps when teachers aren´t aware of the relation between clients interests and colleagues. Other professions which have explicit ethical codes very firmly put clients welfare as the main interest.

This phenomenon could be linked to the structural conditions, which have strong influence over the teaching profession. Who is the client? - the state, or the pupils? The government gives the order. The pupils are the objects. Compared to the relation between a physician and his patient it is not so evident that pupils are clients of teachers.

However, pupils are put in a relation of dependence to the teacher similar to the patients relation to the physician. This relation of dependence is reason enough to develop teachers´ professional ethics. Tom (1980) quoted by Elliott (1989) puts it like this: Teaching is moral in at least two senses. On the one hand, the act of teaching is moral because it presupposes that something of value is to be taught ( Peters 1965). On the other hand, the teacher-student relationsship is inherently moral beacuse of its inequality. This relationship, notes Hawkins (1973) entails an offer of control by one individual over the functioning of another, who in accepting this offer, is tacitly assured that control will not be exploitive but will be used to enhance the competence and extend the intependence of the one controlled.

The teacher in case number one above seems to identify her obligations to the pupils but she is not sure if they are justified if they are in conflict to interests of a colleague. She as well as many other teachers would benefit from the guidance an explicit code would give. Perhaps it is because of the double mandate that teachers now and then act as if they have to stick together against the pupils as well as against the state.

Then - how do teachers develop a common system of professional ethics? Teacher education has not helped them so far. Also the structural position of their profession, in the meaning of the double mandate, can even prevent the process of developing a common professional code. In addition to these circumstances there are few opportunities in our secular society to develope one´s private ethics. MacIntyre(1984) suggests that a secondary group like a profession could be the scene where ethical norms are to be made visible, since other scenes that earlier had this function have left it aside. Teachers have not so far started that process.They are left alone to follow their private conscious or unconscious norms. Some individuals then become more aware of professional ethics than others.

It´s obvious that more heavy responsibility and strengthened autonomy of the teaching profession require common ethics as a guidance for the teacher and as a contract of professional quality given to the society. However it also raises questions of a more structural kind about the teaching profession. Is it possible for example, to let a profession of this size have a professional ethic of their own? Even if teachers aren´t always loyal to governmental demands today, there would be a more obvious risk

of losing control over their allegiance, if their common ethics really made them strong together.

Furthermore the teacher collective is too large to through a central professional debate examine,decide and formulate some sort of professional code of ethics. It has to be done in the local school. Sometimes even that is too big. Thus the teacher team is what is left to be a realistic scene for this development. Sockett (1990) suggests a similar way of developing what he calles a code of practice in order to increase teacher accountability.

It seems to be most realistic to support the development of explicit local ethical codes that includes universal ethics as well as internal values. In cooperations like teacher-teams there are prospects to develop common norms. At the same time the common ground is a qualification for making the cooperation effective and meaningful. There is one more condition, which is not the issue of this paper, namely a common professional language.

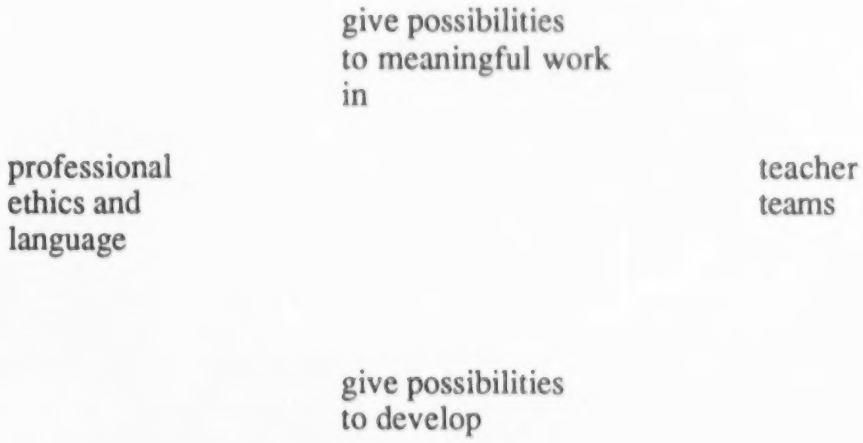


Fig 1.
The professionell development circle.

Teacher teams benefit from a common norm-system. They also create possibilities to develop such common norms. The process is a circle. A depiction of the professional development is given in figure 1.

A locally fomulated code of ethics has its greatest value in providing a guiding function to teachers. It is perhaps not so convincing as a contract

between the teaching profession and society as a whole. Its function as giving professional status would be less effective. However it is probably more concrete in the way it is interpreted by the teachers. For example teachers might interpret quite differently the principle of being fair to children, even though there is agreement on its general meaning. When norms are locally tried and discussed, any disagreemants will become evident.

This pre-study has given reasons to continue the search for professional ethics for teachers. The future questions of research are among others:

- How do the structural conditions ( and changes in conditions) of the teaching profession affect the development of teacher ethics? This is a question that has to be answered theoretically.

- Are there any common norms of ethics which teachers follow in their behaviour without knowing they are shared? This question is possible to answer empirically. Teachers will be presented with an ethical dilemma during an interview; the dilemmas are constructed from the critical incidents derived from the pre-study.

- What will be the role of teacher education in building teacher ethics? Teacher education provides the base from which teacher ethics is developed. The conclusions from this study can perhaps give some suggestions concerning methods and contents of this matter in teacher education.

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